

Gods, mortals, and stories in the *Medea*

Rosanna Omitowoju

A story of a divorced woman revenging herself by killing her ex-husband's new wife, new father-in-law, and the children she bore him is hardly a comfortable story. Rosanna Omitowoju here explores that discomfort and the implications it has both for how we think about the gods' interaction in the world and for how we think about what makes a satisfactory story.

An uncomfortable story

I like the *Medea*, but I find it a really uncomfortable play. It is a difficult story: Medea is a foreign princess who has been brought to Greece by her husband, the hero Jason. In the part of the story which happens before our play opens, she has helped Jason to achieve the amazing feat of stealing the Golden Fleece, but she has only managed to do this by betraying – gruesomely – her own family (she kills her own brother, chops him up, and drops him bit by bit into the sea so that her father's pursuit of her and Jason's ship is delayed, as he gathers up the scattered remains).

When our play opens, Jason has just decided that it is in everybody's interests, his, their children's, and even Medea's (though it is hard for us to tell how believable is this final claim) for him to abandon his relationship with Medea and instead marry the daughter of the king of Corinth. He has a point: without a city and fugitive, they are in a difficult and vulnerable position. But Medea cannot see it like this: she can only see that the husband for whom she has sacrificed everything is abandoning her, dishonouring the promises that he made to her and rejecting their shared history as partners in the heroic exploit of the Golden Fleece.

By the end of the play, Medea's insoluble rage will have led her to kill Jason's new bride, his new father-in-law, and his children, who are of course also her own. She has done so partly because she has used the children as tools to bring about the other murders, and fears the Corinthians' retribution, and partly as a way of further punishing Jason. In the final scene she escapes on the divine Chariot of the Sun to a pre-arranged refuge in Athens.

Is the play feminist, or misogynist?

So it is an uncomfortable story, with marital infidelity, female rage, infanticide, and, in the description of the deaths of Jason's bride and her father, some moments of real horror. It is also difficult in a number of other ways. For example, modern critics have found themselves unable to decide whether Euripides' portrayal of Medea marks him as a sort of 'proto-feminist', witnessing and calling attention to the crushing unfairness of women's lives in a highly sex-segregated and patriarchal society, or whether this play represents women in a miso-gynistic light, focusing on their propensity for uncontrollable rage and violence and their being the ultimate source of instability in society.

This is not just a modern confusion: we would be wrong to think that our own society's tight focus on questions of gender equality is what makes this an issue. The play itself, where Medea speaks with such convincing rationality yet acts with such passionate violence, is asking us to see the complexities of moral problems and humans' role as moral agents in ways which are both limited by and at the same time transcend boundaries of gender.

The role of the gods

This is something important to think about, but here I am going to focus not on this aspect of the play, but on two areas closely related to it. I want to think about the role of the gods in the *Medea*, and, by extension, in tragedy generally, and I want to think also about how stories function.

It is almost a commonplace to say that tragedy takes place not just in a ritual in a festival in honour of the god Dionysus, but in fact is that ritual. To act in or be the audience to a tragedy is to take part in a religious experience which highlights human lives as being lived in proximity to the other world, the world of the divine. But

in tragedies there is no comfort in this: show me a tragedy and I'll show you a world in which the relationship of the human and divine worlds is confusing, opaque, fraught with miscommunication and misinterpretation.

However, unlike the 'epiphanic' tragedies (in which gods appear on stage), difficult though those appearances may be, the *Medea* belongs to a tradition where there is no divine appearance and no divine sanction even for trivial human events, let alone the big ones. When Medea says, 'O great Themis and Lady Artemis, do you see what I suffer?' (160–1) or 'By Hecate...not one of them will hurt my heart and rejoice...' (397–8), we have no way of knowing the status of these claims for divine attention and aid. They could indicate a divine world that works in some way to guarantee key moral principles in the human realm ('O Zeus and the Justice of Zeus and the light of Helios, now I will be finally victorious...', 774–5), but the play gives us no sense of this (I'll come to the Chariot of the Sun later). In the terms of the play, these calls upon the divine world could be just that – vain calls, indicative of a human hope of a divine system that somehow supports humans' attempts to impose order and justice, but a hope that is never realized in any comprehensible or systematic way.

For that matter, such calls upon the divine could be no more than the rhetorical claims and power-posturing of individual characters. If one character says 'I think what you are doing is wrong' or 'I call the gods to witness that what you are doing is wrong', which carries more weight? Obviously the latter. And the play gives us no reason to be sure that these claims to divine attention or sanction do not function merely at this level, as a sort of invisible gun waved in the air by one character at another, to get the upper hand in a situation of verbal conflict.

Interpreting the Chariot of the Sun

What about the Chariot of the Sun on which Medea escapes at the end of the play, after her murderous revenge and when her final exchange of bitter insults with Jason is completed? In a 'mechanis-

tic' view of divine intervention, or with a stable view of the intervention of gods in human affairs and its significance, you might want to think that this gives a final, end-of-the-play answer to the question of who is justified. By this argument Medea (and the 'feminist' argument) is ultimately 'right' because she is allowed to escape at the end and with the agency of divine aid. However, I have two quite strong things to say to counter this, one quite specific to the *Medea* and indeed, to Medea herself, and the other quite general, about the play, and even about the wider context of tragedy.

Why does Helios allow his chariot to be used by Medea the child-killer, the Medea who has subverted not only the rules of the patriarchal order of society, but indeed of any order we might imagine for human life, in which parents give life to, and do not take life from, their children? Helios himself, of course, gives no indication. From his perspective any motivation is totally opaque (as we should expect). But Medea herself gives a pretty straightforward explanation to Jason, which we have no reason to doubt:

Speak if you want, but you will never touch me with your hand: Helios, the father of my father gives me such a chariot, a protection against a hostile hand.
(Medea 1320–22)

Her use of the chariot for her escape is not an indication of divine approval of – or interest in, or even awareness of – the bloody and terrible revenge she has just taken. She has its use because she is his granddaughter and it is useful to her. Far from being an indication that gods interact even tangentially with mortal concerns at a systematically moral level, it shows that they are partial, parochial, and nepotistic – if indeed they engage themselves in mortal concerns at all.

Our stories and the stories of Greek tragedy

The second point leads on from this, but goes much wider, and I am going to approach it from a particularly wide perspective. For us, in western European culture and a Judaeo-Christian moral tradition, the stories that we are offered by literature and the media can ultimately (if very roughly) be boiled down to the story of how people get what they deserve. This may work at a fairly simple level: the hero gets the girl; James Bond beats the baddies because he is good and they are bad; Elizabeth and Darcy turn out to be hero and heroine after all and to deserve the marital happiness which the end of *Pride and Prejudice* projects for us into the soft-focus future.

This also works at a more complex level where moral goodness and badness might be relative terms, the anti-hero mostly bad but redeemed by some self-awareness or small act of honour in his corrupt world. In this more nuanced version, there is nothing simplistic or black and white about heroes and villains or about how 'what they deserve' might cash out: but they still get it. Whether the 'good outcome' is a tiny personal triumph in the midst of world-stirring events, a moment of transient joy, or a shift in perspective or understanding of the self, it still goes to someone who somehow, as the narrative shows us, deserved it.

Greek tragedy does not share this perspective. Greek tragedy is the story of people getting things whether or not they deserved them, or deserving one thing, but getting another. Or put another way, it is a world in which peoples' stories and what they deserve are two separable and at times totally separate things. Medea does not deserve to be abandoned by Jason, but she is: this does not make her entitled to anything, any righting of the moral record book, but she settles her score on her own terms anyway. This is not to say that the potential for a match between what a character deserves and the eventual outcome is a totally alien concept for the tragic stage: indeed the awareness of such a possibility, but its constant frustration, is crucial to the poignant power which the plays always did, and still do, exercise.

Changing the story

I am going to end with one final thought about the *Medea* to tie up these thoughts. Why does Medea not kill Jason in order to get her revenge on him? She certainly contemplates it (162–4, 374–5). This is something my students often ask me when we study the play. The answer they often give themselves is that the punishment that Medea metes out to Jason is far more long-lasting, because he has to live with the pain of the knowledge of the death of his children. This works up to a point, but there is something unconvincing at its heart.

After reading the play many times and thinking the kind of thoughts which I have just outlined above about characters and their stories, I think the answer goes like this: in the end, characters are defined by their stories, by the story of their life which remains to them and sums them up at the end of their lives, not by some notion of moral desert. Jason already has a big story – from which he wants to exclude Medea – as the heroic captain of the Argo and the action man who gained the Golden Fleece against all the odds. If Medea kills Jason, then she leaves him as that man, crystallized (like, for instance, Agamemnon) as the hero-turned-victim of the unspeakable and transgressive violence of his own wife. But as it is, she diminishes him as a hero, robs him of his victim-status and leaves him instead to dwindle into the protagonist of a story so boring that no-one knows it:

But you, as is right, will die badly/wretchedly (kakōs), a bad/ wretched (kakos) man, struck on the head with a bit of the Argo, seeing the bitter fulfilment of your marriage to me.

I certainly don't know that part of the story – do you? What I mean here is that Medea punishes Jason by diminishing his hero-story, by giving him in addition a story of the man who could not protect his bride or his children and whose life ends in the ignominious obscurity of a tale no-one has heard.

Of course the irony is that Medea herself is going to go to glorious Athens (where the audience themselves are sitting), and the child she will help Aegeus to have is the heroic Theseus, whose story and the story of the noble Athens he helps create will overtake everyone else's story, for ever. In the end, both Jason and Medea will get written out in favour of the story of democratic Athens: so maybe Jason and Medea do get something of what they both deserve after all.

Rosanna Omitowoju teaches at the University of Cambridge. She specializes in thinking about violent and unpleasant stories involving women – her Rape and the politics of consent in Classical Athens was published in 2002.